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922 Relatives Reunited With Prisoners After Boat Arrives From Cuba

By Chet Dimauro
PORT EVERGLADES, Fla., Dec. 27 (UPI)—Relatives of the Bay of Pigs invasion prisoners arrived in the United States today—poor in just about everything but hope.

"I had to leave behind everything I owned, all my possessions," said Maria C. Sobra, 49, a pharmacist and dietitian.

"But," she added, "the happiness of seeing my son, I'm sure, will more than make up for the things I left behind."

The relatives—922 men, women and children—arrived at 9:04 a. m. EST aboard the freighter African Pilot, the black-hulled vessel used to transport the medical supplies demanded by Premier Fidel Castro in exchange for the prisoners.

It was the last trip for the African Pilot, which is being retired from service, but Red Cross officials disclosed that "preliminary arrangements" they boarded.

The new arrivals were full of grim stories of the final hours in their homeland. They told of being forced to stand in line so long that children passed out from exhaustion, and of being stripped of their belongings by Castro's militiamen just before they boarded.

They encountered further troubles when, once aboard, nine cases of measles were discovered and seasickness began taking its toll.

But the refugees wore these cares lightly.

One youngster drew a laugh from the crowd by skipping down the gangplank, greeting everyone he met with the salute:

"Hello, Kennedy."

The relatives wore all the best clothing they had to keep it from being confiscated by Castro's militiamen.

Any articles of value—including Christmas toys—were not on their backs were snatched up by the militiamen, who went through all suitcases. The loot was thrown into trucks parked on the shore for that purpose.

Once ashore, the refugees were quickly processed by immigration, customs and health authorities, and then boarded buses for a 50-minute ride to a mass reunion at Dinner Key Auditorium in Miami. Waiting there were the 1113 invasion prisoners' relatives.

The militiamen told me, "Either you take the ring off, we cut the finger off, or you don't go." He said he finally worked the ring off by using soap and other lubricants.

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No official passenger list had been released, but most of the prisoners seemed to know what relatives they would find among the new arrivals. The faces of some of the men lit up as they spotted someone they hadn't expected.

One woman was embraced so forcefully by her prisoner husband as she stepped off the bus that she lost her shoes. They walked off into the crowd, arms around each other, leaving the shoes.